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# The Picaro and the Prole, the Spiv and the Honest Tommy in Leon Griffiths's *Minder*

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Stephen Baker and Paddy Hoey

## **Abstract:**

First broadcast in 1979, Thames Television's comedy drama, *Minder*, coincided with the arrival of the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Central to the series' popularity was the character of Arthur Daley, a shady, small-time businessman whose proclivity for wheeling and dealing saw him regarded as epitomising an era marked by the free-market, entrepreneurial zeal of the Thatcher administration. Arthur's 'partner', Terry McCann, by contrast, was a disconcerting picture of what life could be like for the working class in the new economy. As an ex-boxer and an ex-prisoner with a conscience, he relied on Arthur to find him casual employment as a minder.

Far from reading *Minder* as an endorsement of Thatcherism and its military adventurism, enterprise culture and hankering after a perceived past national glory, this article considers the series as an ironic comment on such pretensions, and Arthur and Terry as underworld, low-life versions of familiar national heroes—the entrepreneur and the 'honest Tommy'. The article also goes further, situating Arthur Daley's character in a generic tradition of dubious working-class enterprise and criminality that pre-dates the image of the spiv, popularised in British films such as *Waterloo Road* in the 1940s, going back to the picaros and proles of the eighteenth century and illustrated in Peter Linebaugh's book about the period, *The London Hanged*.

**Keywords:** class; comedy drama; *Minder*; picaresque; proletarian; spivs; Thatcherism.

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## Introduction

First broadcast six months after Margaret Thatcher's election as Prime Minister in May 1979, *Minder* (ITV, 1979–94) is credited with capturing something of the zeitgeist of the era. Its initial gritty, West London, urban realism and troubled multicultural melange of ethnicities often belied the generic definition of 'comedy drama.' Racial and religious tensions were the underlying background to the Damon Runyon-esque tales of degenerate gamblers, petty gangsters and grifters trying to scrape a living in the run-down, rubble-strewn terraced streets that would provide the backdrop for the first wave of capitalist redevelopment during the Thatcher era. Its depiction of dubious entrepreneurship, embodied in the character of Arthur Daley (George Cole), a shady small-time businessman often operating on the fringes of legality, seemed to resonate with the privatising, deregulating, free-market zeal of the Conservative government at that time. Arthur was the image of assertive entrepreneurial energy, but *Minder* also contained its antithesis in the figure of Terry McCann (Dennis Waterman), Arthur's hired hand, who provided an ominous image of working-class life in the new economy. An ex-prisoner, he was employed by Arthur on a casual basis as a 'minder' or bodyguard. This was a precarious existence, and it is never convincingly explained why Terry tolerated this arrangement. Certainly, as an ex-prisoner his employment prospects were limited, but essentially his relationship with Arthur seemed to be based upon an unspoken mutual regard or dependency that audiences were asked to take for granted or account for in their own imaginations.

One way of conceiving of Arthur and Terry's relationship is to see them as characters bound together by British history and rooted in a tradition of popular genres and ideologies that *Minder* reworked for its contemporary audience. Specifically, Arthur and Terry represented underworld, low-life versions of otherwise national heroes—the entrepreneur and the combatant or soldier whose violence captured, protected and expanded imperial markets. Relations between these two types, as manifest in popular culture, have never been easy, although history welded them together in pursuit of Britain's imperial ambitions. *Minder*, by locating its characters in a multi-ethnic, working-class milieu in London prior to redevelopment and gentrification, was less an endorsement of what Tom Nairn (2002: 33) called Britain's 'imperium of commerce' than an ironic comment on its pretensions.

*Minder* also counteracts the myth of meritocracy and the promise of social mobility held out by the era's enthusiasm for privatisation

and deregulation. Whatever Arthur's pretensions, the high society and respectability he yearned for excluded him. To some extent this is facilitated by a formal characteristic of the television series that tends towards the restoration of narrative equilibrium, returning the characters to the place they began, ready for another instalment. However, as we shall see, the writers of *Minder* made this social restoration a recurring feature, with stories of Arthur's entrepreneurial ambitions thwarted by those in possession of the cultural capital and class that he lacked. In this way, we can read Arthur and Terry as victims of a rigid British class system, as well as ironic versions of national heroes. In addition, this article suggests, we might also locate them in relation to a history of mythologised working-class rogues and primitive rebels trying to make their own way in austere circumstances. If their criminality renders such figures unpalatable to the political establishment, the political Left has also baulked at their individualism and entrepreneurship, seeing it as being in contradistinction to traditions of working-class solidarity and collectivism. However, the scholarship of historians such as Peter Linebaugh and Carl Winslow perhaps allows a reading of Arthur Daley, in particular, as being representative of something more than untrammelled greed and avarice.

### Formations

The specific formation of *Minder* and its sensitivity to the nuances of class perhaps owes something to the politics and background of its creator and writer, Leon Griffiths. A Yorkshire-born but Glasgow-raised socialist, Griffiths arrived in London at the age of sixteen for a series of labouring jobs. He discovered writing during his national service, contributing to Armed Forces Radio, and then subsequently worked on the communist newspaper the *Daily Worker* in the 1950s, rising to the position of drama critic. Griffiths would disavow communism in 1956 when the USSR invaded Hungary and resign his position, yet he never relinquished his socialism.

After leaving the *Daily Worker*, he failed to make a career in the flourishing Fleet Street of the time and chanced upon television when he was invited to write for ITV's *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, which also employed American writers blacklisted by Senator Joe McCarthy's anti-communist witch-hunt in the USA. Griffiths found his metier in writing television plays and film scripts in the crime thriller genre which were undercut by the 'dark humour, incisive wit and cleverly

crafted dialogue that became his forte', as noted by Brian Hawkins, *Minder*'s unofficial archivist and biographer (2014: 16). Hawkins recalls that two of Griffiths's writing assignments provided a perfect foundation for the creation of *Minder*. One was the corrupt world of horse-race fixing in Yorkshire television's *The Racing Game* (1979), which slightly prefigures *Minder*, and the other the BBC Play for Today *Dinner at the Sporting Club* (1978), where John Thaw, Waterman's co-star in *The Sweeney* (ITV, 1975–7), played a boxing manager tormented by his fighter being forced to lose a fight which has been fixed for financial gain.

In the early incarnations of *Minder*, Griffiths returned to this idea of the small man preyed upon and forced to accept victimisation for the financial benefit of others: indeed, it is the central narrative motivation of Terry McCann. In the opening paragraph of the *Minder* novel that accompanied the first series, we are introduced to Terry, who has been hospitalised as a result of doing a break-in for Arthur, who promptly abandons him. In an internal dialogue, Terry remarks: 'That's it, he thought, that's always it: Terry lands in the shit, Arthur pisses off. It was the law of nature, nothing he could fight. Winners win, losers lose. For just a second Terry felt like crying' (Griffiths 1979: 9).

The television series' comic roguery belies darker generic roots in an unadulterated crime drama as originally conceived by Griffiths and on display in the novel. Indeed, the initial treatment for *Minder* provided a much shadier picture of west London and was initially confined to the specific environs of Fulham, a frontline area inhabited by the old urban working class but also increasingly marked by gentrification. In this space, Arthur could attempt to play both sides of the social and class divides in British life, a wheeler dealer whose wife, famously immortalised on TV as 'er indoors' although she was never seen, appears in the novel making vol-au-vents for the local Conservative Association supper.

As a habitué of north London drinking clubs, Griffiths was drawn to rogues like Arthur Daley. In a quote that could have served both as a *modus operandi* for *Minder* and as an explanation of its huge success, Griffiths told the *TV Times* in 1991:

I've always been fascinated by low life, the semi-villains of this world. I like observing them, wondering how they make out. They lived on their wits and were great storytellers. I don't suppose half of what they said was true but it didn't matter. They were alive; they crackled with a sort of crazy energy. (Quoted in Hawkins 2014: 17)

*Minder* began as a 'tough, hard-hitting gangland film' which a literary agent suggested should be reworked for TV focusing on its two central characters, a small-time, crooked, second-hand car salesman and his bodyguard, an ex-boxer with a prison record (ibid.:17). In the novel, Arthur is a sovereign-ringed, tailor-cut suit and Italian loafer wearing 'well-respected, self-styled godfather, a perpetrator of his own myth', a sexual predator with a mistress who he jealously mistrusts, feeding doubts about his sexual prowess in the face of younger, harder men (Griffiths 1979: 36). This early version of Arthur, as drawn out in the novel, is a 'proper' hard man and not the Falstaffian coward of the television show. He is a man who has been in borstal as a youth and who has nailed a paedophile's foot to the floor in revenge for repeated sexual attacks on young boys. But on television, Arthur is transformed into the hapless Crombie-coated, Trilby-hatted and suede brogue-wearing spiv redolent of Cole's turn as Flash Harry in the *St Trinian's* films. He is a man who drives the solidly British Jaguar and Daimler luxury cars of the upper-middle and upper classes. In the novel, he is the purveyor of minders, violence and protection, who drives a Rover 3500 which he hopes to upgrade to a BMW. The class distinctions may seemingly be small, but they are semiotically important when defining the symbolic consumption habits imbued in the British class system.

It is also important to note that the programme's title is *Minder*, and so by definition it should be about Terry McCann, the stoic, put-upon, working-class combatant. Euston Films, which had achieved great success with four series of *The Sweeney* (ITV, 1975–8), was searching for a vehicle for Waterman, who had played DS Jack Carter, the loyal lieutenant to John Thaw's DI Jack Regan. Although *The Sweeney's* hard-hitting scenes of violence would become mocked for their almost pantomime level of confrontation, its realism was groundbreaking in the early 1970s, rivalling popular American imports like *Kojak* (Universal Television, 1973–8) in its depiction of the urban criminal milieu. Waterman was initially taken with the early scripts of *Minder* especially with the underlying humour that had not been present in his breakthrough show, and he told the *TV Times* in 1978: 'It's an action show with comedy mixed in. Terry is a rogue who lives on his wits, but he is charming as well as tough' (quoted in Hawkins 2014: 17). However, the Terry McCann that gradually emerged throughout the show's run became a conventional, put-upon, working-class everyman, a proletarian white knight, guardian of the 'little man' and frequently women, often mitigating problems of Arthur's making. While Waterman was slotted in for Terry, it is interesting to note that when casting Arthur, there was some resistance

to George Cole taking the role as he was considered too middle-class. It was only when Euston Pictures's executive producer Verity Lambert intervened, noting that Cole had made a name for himself playing Flash Harry, the spiv in the *St Trinian's* films, that the deal was sealed (Hawkins 2014). The darker Arthur of Griffiths's imagination was re-tooled as the more recognisable cockney spiv of the popular imagination, although the *TV Times*, 17–23 November 1979, perhaps overegged this aspect of the series by describing the character as a 'suave Mr Fixit' (*TV Times*, 1978). Griffiths told the *Daily Mail Weekend* magazine, 2 May 1984: 'Terry is a failure – a loser. So is Arthur. That's part of the charm of the series. They're little people. Arthur's a selfish man, with a self-protective skin. He's a survivor. To me Arthur is the unacceptable face of private enterprise.'

### The spiv and the honest Tommy

This move from a darker crime genre to comedy drama facilitated Arthur and Terry's appropriation as more charming, palatable generic characters. Terry, despite his criminal background, is indebted to the image and reputation of the stout, self-sacrificing combatant venerated at national war commemorations. Despite the respect paid to him in today's society, the march of the working-class 'Tommy' to the centre of the national imagination has been long and not at all straightforward. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the British ruling class helped to consolidate their unity and leadership with stories and images of their service to the nation, involving what Linda Colley calls a 'highly selective cult of heroism, never focusing on ordinary soldiers or seamen but only those commanding them' ([1992] 2005: 180). It is in this period that the name 'Tommy Atkins' was applied as a generic name for ordinary troops. As Helen Tripp points out, by the First World War the name (or term) 'Tommy' had 'attained a greater significance and depth of meaning' (2002: 2), and she demonstrates 'a dichotomy of contradictory characteristics' attributed to Tommy at that time, simultaneously undisciplined, brave and other. This reflected the deliberations of middle-class society coming to terms with how the war impacted upon social barriers as different classes were brought into proximity with one another. At the end of the war, Tommy was returned to the margins of the national imagination but the Second World War would see a recuperation of the image and reputation of the working-class combatant in an effort to build a consensus behind the war effort.

Arthur, in his own low-comic way, embodies the spirit of free enterprise, which Frank Trentmann has described as ‘the closest modern Britain ever came to a national ideology’ (2008: 2). Free trade was Britain’s ‘civilising mission’ that encompassed peace, progress, freedom and liberty as distinct from the perceived militarism and protectionism of countries such as Imperial Germany. However, Trentmann argues, this national ideology would not survive the First World War, eroded by 7,000 miles of customs barriers at the end of the conflict and by food shortages at home during it (ibid.: 189). Indeed, Trentmann argues that the high price of food and its unequal distribution led to social unrest, particularly in working-class areas where the queues for food were longest. He elaborates on this in terms that highlight the potential tension between the acquisitive entrepreneur and the self-sacrificing soldier: ‘The snake-like profiteer and monopolist became ubiquitous images. Soldiers, it seems, were being betrayed on the home front: “While the soldier risks his life, the monopolist robs his wife”, as a leaflet by the *Daily Citizen* summed it up’ (ibid.: 196).

However, by the Second World War an apparently thriving black market administered by spivs would help to alleviate the privations of war and rationing, although in both official discourse and the cinema of the period, the spiv tended to be presented as ‘dangerous, unpatriotic and un-British’ (Street 1997: 72). Nonetheless, as Peter Wollen has observed, there was a public ambivalence about the spiv and a degree of sympathy for such glamorous, anti-authority figures, who acted as ‘intermediary in the transfer of black market goods from army camps, docks, railways yards, lorry parks, industrial depots and so on, to a grateful mass of consumers’ (2002: 186).

That ambivalence is played out in Sydney Gilliat’s *Waterloo Road* (1945) in which Jim Colter (John Mills) goes AWOL from his regiment when he fears that his wife Tillie (Joy Shelton) is having an affair with the draft-dodging spiv Ted Purvis (Stewart Granger). Colter, the heroic British Tommy who has put his life on the line for Queen and country is set in opposition to Purvis, the self-serving philanderer whose freedom to pursue his own selfish ends are, of course, underwritten by the other man’s self-sacrifice and public service. The film climaxes with a fight between them in which the soldier beats his rival and re-establishes his loving relationship with his wife. Yet, as Gill Plain notes of *Waterloo Road*: ‘While the frame narrative works to close down the transgressive potential of the film, this potential is immediately reopened by its visual dynamics’ (2006: 86). Purvis is the glamorous heart-throb who gets all the best lines, compared to the dowdy, uncommunicative



Colter. But as Tony Williams (2000) and Plain both suggest, the real opposition in *Waterloo Road* is not between the scandalous but dazzling Purvis and the dutiful but dull Colter; rather it is between the upstart Purvis and the seemingly omniscient advocate of the status quo, Dr Montgomery (Alistair Sim). The spiv represents a transgressive threat to middle-class, conservative patriarchy, and Jim Colter is merely a proxy for Dr Montgomery's battle to secure it on the home front.

Arthur Daley poses a similar symbolic threat to the social order with his loquaciousness, his Saville Row suits and Jaguar, appropriating the iconography of upper-middle-class affluence, even though he clearly lacks the class and cultural capital to belong properly to that club. As Griffiths himself put it in an interview in *Weekend* magazine, 2 May 1984:

Arthur fancies himself as a gentleman. I see him at home – the paintings aren't quite right, the furniture is slightly over the top. He dresses well and admires Savile Row. He'd never go there though. He always knows a little Greek in an upstairs room somewhere who'll make the same suits for less than half the price!

On the other hand, Terry, the down-at-heel, humble foot soldier, may be the 'salt of the earth' like Jim Colter in *Waterloo Road*, but in this case the visual and verbal dynamics of *Minder* work against the 'little man' because there is no omniscient Dr Montgomery figure to reset the narrative frame for the audience in his favour.

In Anglo-British history and culture there is an explicit but shifting relationship between the combatant and the entrepreneur. Together these figures are integral to what Tom Nairn refers to as Anglo-Britain's 'mythological greatness'. This, Nairn argues, is the

unshakeable obsession with Britain being a 'world power'. The fact of 'greatness', international weight and special influence, were never secondary to Anglo-Britain's characteristic state. They were not apprehended as a mere addition to Britain's political arsenal – like a bonus or a stroke of good luck that might eventually be put aside. Rather, for around two hundred years they were considered essential for economy and state alike, and a class structure came to be crystallised around them. (2002: 33)

This 'imperium of commerce', at the core of which lay the City of London, was built through capacious enterprise and underwritten by military violence. Of this the British are reminded daily in the spectacular, monumental architecture of financial power in the capital

city, and the relatively more modest war memorials that spread out to provincial cities, towns and villages.

*Minder* coincided with a critical period in British history that brought the martial and the entrepreneurial into focus again. In 1982 Margaret Thatcher's by then unpopular Conservative government was rescued by a military adventure in the South Atlantic. British forces were dispatched, amid much patriotic tub-thumping, to reclaim the Falkland Islands from Argentina in a victory that further paved the way for the enterprise culture. Thatcher was in no doubt about this. In a speech to a Conservative rally at Cheltenham racecourse on 3 July 1982, in the wake of the victory in the South Atlantic, she proclaimed: 'We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. We have instead a new-found confidence—born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8,000 miles away' (quoted in Barnett [1982] 2012: 138–9). Beyond the task force sent against Argentina in a war that helped to secure the Conservative party a second term in government, Thatcher underscored her free market politics with belligerent Cold War language and violent confrontations with trade unions at home, which she notoriously labelled the 'enemy within'.

### Thatcher's Britain

The coincidence of *Minder* with the rise of Thatcher's muscular, enterprising patriotism might have lent itself to a more assertive and central role for Terry in the series, as originally conceived. However, to some extent the eclipsing of Terry—both as labourer and combatant—by the business-savvy Arthur owes something to a contemporary crisis of working-class masculinity. This was a period of declining heavy industries and deskilling in the workplace, coupled with a weakening of the ideologies that underpinned working-class male identities grounded in hard, physical labour. Certainly, industry and skilled labour are conspicuous by their absence in *Minder*. The London it evokes of gangsters, tricksters and small traders is far removed from the industrial working class of northern realism. Terry learned his trade in the boxing ring, but a spell in prison cut his career short and he had no other discernible skill but his ability to fight. As Griffiths put it in the *Weekend* interview cited above: 'Terry is the only honest man in London. That's how I think of him. He may cut some corners legally, but he knows the difference between good and evil' (quoted in Hutchison 1984). He is no thug. His instincts are to de-escalate the situation before resorting to violence, and where Arthur sells Terry's talents on the open market, the minder himself

has an acute sense of public service which often tempers Arthur's acquisitiveness and opportunism in the pursuit of a 'nice little earner'. Yet Terry's gallant sense of public service looked misplaced in an era increasingly defined by aggressive individualism. In addition, Terry's promiscuity left him a man out of time in a sexual climate shaped by the threat of AIDS, the then modest advances of feminism and a popular culture that was experimenting openly with gender and sexuality. By the time *Minder* was first broadcast in 1979, Terry was already as dated as his flared jeans. Mary Whitehouse's campaign against violence on television put paid to Terry's fighting skills and Cole noted Terry's emasculation in his autobiography:

Political correctness was beginning to show itself in society in the early 1980s and this slowly permeated into the show. In the first three series, Dennis's character was never slow to jump into bed with a pretty girl at the first opportunity. But the AIDS scare at the beginning of the 1980s put a stop to this. There was a directive from the senior management of the company saying that it had to stop. (2014: 183)

By the beginning of the 1990s and the eighth series of *Minder*, not only had Terry been overshadowed by the persona of Arthur but he had been replaced by a new minder, Ray (Gary Webster), Arthur's nephew: younger, better groomed, better educated, teetotal and more attuned to the sexual politics of the era.

Arthur, on the other hand, seemed to epitomise the enterprise culture, but just as his lack of social and cultural capital barred him from high society on-screen, the image of Arthur's underworld entrepreneurship was no more welcomed off-screen by the UK's political and economic establishment. For instance, in 1994, after fifteen continuous years of Conservative government, *The Economist* lamented research that found that the public had a low opinion (or the 'wrong' opinion) of business people. In an edition that carried a front-page picture of George Cole as Arthur, headlined 'How Britain Sees Entrepreneurs', the magazine bemoaned how the character was a 'symbol of a country where trade had become a bit disreputable'. Similarly, businessman David Hall complained that his fellow entrepreneurs 'are too often equated with racketeers and spivs, epitomised by the British TV character Arthur Daley. Arthur thrives in a world of dodgy deals and hoodwinked customers ... Stereotyping of this sort is regrettable and needs eradicating' (quoted in Boyle and Kelly 2012: 79).

However, Daley's 'disreputableness' is not the only reason *The Economist* and its readership should have felt discomfort at his

association with entrepreneurialism. There is at the heart of *Minder* something deeply anti-establishment. It offers frequent depictions of those who are on the surface the embodiment of respectable enterprise but who turn out to be every bit as bent as Arthur himself. It is one of the series' well-worn tropes that Arthur's yearning to break through the class ceiling of British life proves impossible because he is debarred by a coterie of non-spiv, socially acceptable figures that represent the middle and upper classes. In fact, such characters provide the occasional plot devices that underpin the series' cyclical narrative that requires Arthur and Terry to remain *in situ* at the Winchester drinking club or second-hand car dealership, rooted in their class positions in readiness for the next episode. The respectable professional class frequently comes to figure as Arthur's nemesis as he pursues upward social mobility and middle-class acceptance. However, there is no porousness in the dividing line between the opportunistic urban working class and the sophistication of the middle class, who are no less venal, on occasions, in their pursuit of a fast buck. Alan Clarke noted this in a perceptive analysis of *Minder* in *Marxism Today*, identifying the force of the series as coming from its 'constant re-working of the contradictions of the characters' class positions'. For Clarke, this was manifest in 'the tension created in the difference between the pretence of the characters and their actual accomplishment', in particular the distance between Arthur's self-image as a successful, respectable businessman and his appearance to everyone else as a rogue. However, the series played with another, moral dimension to class tensions and contradictions. As Clarke argued: 'There is a strong distinction between the respectable characters and the disreputable ones. To complicate the issues there is no easy correlation between class position and respectability. Some of the biggest villains are the most affluent members of the cast.' For Clarke, what distinguishes Arthur Daley from some of his more pernicious, wealthier social superiors is the lack of malice in his actions. He never really harms anyone by his business practices. Arthur is not dishonest enough to be 'completely fraudulent and although keen to indulge in sharp practice is quite often the victim himself' (1985: 32).

For instance, in the episode 'The Car Lot Baggers' (8 February 1984), the oily and well spoken, socially superior property developer Apsimon (James Faulkner), in cahoots with the corrupt local councillor, Fribbins (Colin Jeavons), aims to swindle Arthur's friend out of his commercial premises in order to re-develop it as a supermarket. Similarly, in 'The Wrong Goodbye' (6 February 1989), the final episode to feature Waterman as Terry, Arthur is the target of a sting by a trio

of middle-class businessmen to swindle him out of his car lot for a fraction of what it is worth to redevelop it, again as a supermarket. The triumvirate in this case are property development vulture Guy Wheeler (Paul Eddington), who is assisted in his endeavours by the bent bank manager William Pierce (Simon Cadell) and the local government planning officer Davis (Tony Lees). The well-spoken Cadell, famed for his turn as the ineffectual holiday camp manager in the sitcom *Hi-De-Hi* (BBC, 1980–8), is also representative of the corrupt middle classes in series 2's ninth episode 'All Mod Cons' (6 November 1980), where he is the crooked casino manager. In the 'Wrong Goodbye', Arthur is, ironically, saved from losing his car lot when Detective Sergeant Jones (Michael Povey), Arthur and Terry's long-suffering pursuer, intervenes at the Masonic Lodge and threatens the conspirators with unmasking their criminal conspiracy.

Arthur struggles for acceptance in this apparently respectable world, overcompensating for what he perceives as his lower social position both by becoming obsequious and adopting the dress and mannerisms of the middle and upper classes in a pantomimic or music-hall fashion. In the fifth series' opening episode, 'Goodbye Sailor' (5 September 1984), Arthur meets another well-worn British literary and dramatic stereotype, the bounder, in the shape of suave yachtsman Commander Teddy Hawksley (Moray Watson), whose outer sophistication hides the fact that he is a tobacco smuggler. However, Arthur reveals his social origins at the yacht club when, as Alan Clarke points out, he fails to mobilise the social skills of the middle class, declining the offer of a pink gin and asking for a pink vodka instead.

For Arthur, social mobility is simply, in some ways, a superficial self-rebranding exercise: the adoption of the appearance and mannerisms of the classes which he aspires to join. In the first episode of the second series, 'National Pelmet' (11 September 1980), Arthur assumes the dress code of the country horse-racing set as he and Terry become involved in a scheme to guard the racehorse of the episode's eponymous title. When Terry laments that he could be at the more authentically working-class greyhound-racing at Hackney Stadium, Arthur exasperatedly responds with reference to the then husband of Princess Anne: 'Dogs, Terry? This is where it's at. This is your Home County set: Mark Phillips' lot. Connections.' In the ninth episode of the fourth series, 'Willesden Suite' (29 February 1984), Arthur's invitation to address the Rotary Club luncheon sees him characteristically overcompensate for his relatively low standing in society by aping the dress and mannerisms of a city banker. His absurd pretentiousness is further exposed when he drunkenly delivers

a speech about the global financial system in a pinstripe suit when he is merely a local second-hand car salesman of dubious reputation.

### Picaros and proles

Whatever Arthur's pretensions to social status and wealth, and Terry's essential acceptance of the status quo, Lez Cooke argues that it is possible to offer a progressive reading of *Minder* 'in its portrayal of a small-time criminal who repeatedly outwits the forces of law and order' (2003: 150). However, a more intriguing reading is perhaps one that rejects the tendency to look for progressive or conservative elements and instead appreciates the ambivalence of the text with regard to questions of crime and law and order. This means recalling what E. P. Thompson referred to as a "sub-political" tradition that affected the early working class movement' ([1963] 1991: 64). Thompson points to persistent 'popular attitudes towards crime, amounting at times to an unwritten code, quite distinct from the laws of the land', that condoned forms of smuggling, poaching, tax avoidance and so on (ibid.). Of course, none of this criminal enterprise, and the popular support shown for it, was emblematic of economic success. Rather it appeared in the context of austerity, depredation and enclosure. For instance, Carl Winslow in his study of Sussex smugglers in the eighteenth century, argues: 'Smuggling, far from being seen as an illegal activity by the Sussex poor, was considered a legitimate part of the local economy. It was one of the many methods used by the eighteenth-century rural poor to maintain themselves, regardless of legal prohibitions' ([1975] 2011: 149). Similarly, poachers 'often had the approval of the community ... particularly when the poaching was directed against an unpopular landlord' (Hill 1996: 108).

Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged* offers one of the most fascinating accounts of the relationship between crime and the emerging working class of the eighteenth century. He begins with an account of the life of Jack Sheppard—an east London thief—whose audacity and skill in escaping the authorities, thrilled London's eighteenth-century labouring poor, who themselves were struggling to avoid incarceration in the workhouse and subordination by the employers. Sheppard's exploits made him, at one time, the single most well-known name from eighteenth-century England, comparable to Ned Kelly in Australia and used as a pseudonym by US Wild West outlaws Frank and Jessie James in Missouri (2003: 7). In Manchester during the 1840s, Sheppard's name was more widely known than the Queen's among the city's proletariat. His name and memory,

argues Linebaugh, were 'kept in contexts of social struggle in which a continuity, if not a development, with earlier moral and political conflicts was suggested' (ibid.: 8).

Sheppard stands in a tradition of working-class criminality celebrated by others of that class because they identified with its audacity in the face of oppressive authorities. He appears to have carried himself with the sort of chutzpah that Arthur Daley would demonstrate in the grim 1980s. However, perhaps the most intriguing section of Linebaugh's book, and the one that resonates most with *Minder*, is his discussion of the picaresque proletariat. The picaresque or picaro has its roots in a literary form that concerned itself with the 'survival of those without station in life' (ibid.: 120). Linebaugh finds in the idea of the picaresque a useful device by which to illuminate a section of the London working class in the eighteenth century. In a passage that is surely evocative of Arthur Daley, he describes the picaro as a social type, the 'sharper' or 'blade': 'Such a person exploited with surgical precision the new joints in the social body where pretence and fashion were the skin, exact incisions into which might result in profitable blood-letting' (ibid.: 120).

The picaresque, as a literary form, was ill-suited to giving expression to the collective experience of a proletariat. It was too concerned with the individualistic and episodic tales of its protagonist, and tends towards narrative resolutions hinged on accident, fate or fortune. Still, Linebaugh finds the form a 'valuable and symptomatic source of evidence' through which to explore the 'contradiction between the individualism of the picaresque *presentation* and the collectivism of proletarian *experience*' (ibid.: 122). This contradiction, Linebaugh argues, is found in the life of sailors who seemed to lead double existences, living off both legal earnings (proletarian) and a set of assumed customary rights—in essence, helping themselves to some of the cargo (picaresque) (ibid.: 128). The rhythms of a seafaring life also highlighted this contradictory condition: the proletarian experience of working together under conditions of close supervision and brutal discipline at sea before the picaresque enjoyment of six profligate weeks on shore—'Lords of Six Weeks' as Bernard Mandeville referred to them in his *Fable of the Bees* (1705), and 'slaves for forty-six' as Linebaugh adds ruefully (ibid.: 131).

*Minder* performs this contradiction by separating the picaresque from the proletarian and locating them in two different characters who are apparently inseparable despite their sharp dissimilarities in terms of disposition. Arthur may play the 'lord' and Terry the 'slave' but both are from working-class backgrounds—and there are strong indications

in the series that they have grown up in the same neighbourhood. They start from the same place that neither can escape, given the formal structure of the series, but also, arguably, because of the rigidity of the British class system that excludes and marginalises in terms not only of wealth but of cultural and social capital, and, given the importance of hereditary privilege in the UK, of breeding too.

Linebaugh offers a beautiful sketch of the picaro and the proletarian that is worth quoting at length, because within it appears the outline of the relationship and contradiction at the heart of *Minder*:

Like the picaro, the proletarian has nothing: neither a mess of potage today nor the land and tools to work with that he or she may fill his or her bowl tomorrow. Unlike the picaro, who is defined by shunning work, the proletarian is defined as being a worker. The scene of action of the picaro is the road, the market, the inn, or the tea garden—places of public exchange. The proletarian in contrast operates in places of private production: beneath decks or in a garret. Like the proletarian, the picaro is held in contempt by those who lord over him or her. While the picaro's stance towards the world is active and resourceful—qualities promoted in literary forms that arose from the individuality of the protagonist—the proletarian as an individual is often left passive and dumb by the historical records, more like a drone or a brute. (Ibid.: 151)

Linebaugh asserts the importance of proletarian collective experience and political cooperation, and of the labour that produces and may yet change the world. However, there is, without question, something discomfiting in his history of the working class and its relationship to crime, as there is in the work of others, such as E. P. Thompson and Carl Winslow ([1975] 2011). Socialists and the working-class movement are schooled in a tradition that sees the party and the trade union as the legitimate sites of working-class politics and self-activity. Indeed, Linebaugh highlights this when he recalls a conference in London of the Society for the Study of Labour History in May 1972, where he and other contributors to *Albion's Fatal Tree* presented their work:

Here we were talking to an audience of trade unionists, many of whom were readers of Frederick Engels, who said that 'crime' was an early, backward form of resistance to capitalism ... to be superseded by the political party and trade union. Our audience was wise to the enemies of unions who disparaged their struggle for the basic human right to organise as criminal in one way or another. (Hay et al. 2011: xlii)

For trade unionists to this day, 'Arthur Daley' is a term used to discredit political opponents. In November 2015, the trade union



Unite, in response to government cuts to local authority budgets, accused the Chancellor, George Osborne, of 'the dodgy economics of Arthur Daley' (Unite 2015). The union's Assistant General Secretary for Manufacturing, Tony Burke, had previously levelled a similar accusation at Conservative ministers, complaining of their lack of an industrial strategy (Burke 2015). Yet there is reason, perhaps, for the labour and trade union movement to be cautious when recalling the image of Arthur Daley as a signifier of economic and political decisions that hurt and undermine working-class people. UKIP's Nigel Farage, a stockbroker's son, carried himself in public with a self-conscious spivery – clubbable, anti-establishment, beer drinking and cigarette smoking, he also sported a camel hair coat and occasionally a trilby hat, attire that Arthur Daley wore almost as a uniform. Initially considered an offshoot of the Conservative Party, under Farage, UKIP surprised many by polling well among Labour's natural constituency: working-class voters. Russell Brand referred to the idea that Farage had appropriated the Arthur Daley image, when he warned BBC *Question Time*'s (11 December 2014) audience: 'This man is not a cartoon character. He ain't Del Boy. He ain't Arthur Daley. He is a pound shop Enoch Powell, and we've got to watch him.'

## Conclusion

Arthur Daley as the image of unrespectable, working-class entrepreneurship is politically intriguing because of his ambivalence, which is to some extent captured in both the Left and the conservative Right's refusal to associate with him. In many respects, the self-conscious appropriation of the spiv's image and reputation by nationalist demagoguery renders such squeamishness understandable. However, perhaps socialists, trade unionists and the workers' movement should look again, more closely, at Daley-esque figures for two reasons. The first is respectable capitalism's evident unease at its association with images of rogue working-class enterprise, in contrast to the enduring affection shown such figures by popular audiences. There is a long history of their propagation in popular cultural form, such as stage versions of the delinquents that populate Linebaugh's *The London Hanged*. Paul Du Noyer notes in *In the City*, his peerless history of the roots of London's music, that the popular cultural celebration of the spiv that emerged in British television has its roots in the costermonger street sellers of the early city, who, 'trading on their wits, were the original wheeler-dealers ... of glib tongue and dubious probity' (2009: 27). He notes that the cockney wide-boy is a motif that consistently

endures from this period, found in the music halls of the nineteenth century and brought up to date in the late twentieth-century music of The Kinks, Ian Dury and the Blockheads, Madness, Dizzee Rascal, and Mike Skinner of The Streets. On screen, of course, it has found its form in Del Boy (David Jason) in *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC, 1981–2003), Private Joe Walker (James Beck) in *Dad's Army* (BBC, 1968–77) and the eponymous *Budgie* (Adam Faith) (ITV, 1971–2), another Thames Television production produced by Verity Lambert.

The second reason for looking upon Arthur Daley with greater tolerance is to help overcome the association of working-class employment with drudgery and menial, routine labour. Richard Sennett, for instance, has written extensively about the indignities and condescension suffered by people at work and about the denigration of the work they do (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Sennett 1998, 2008). His response is to draw upon the lessons of the craftsman, looking back to medieval workshops and guilds for examples of patient, evolving skills, as distinct from the view of labour as mind-numbing repetition. Sennett asserts the virtues of a good job well done and the pride taken in it. However, the picaro offers a vision of working-class endeavour as resourceful, quick-witted and creative, outside of the workshop and potentially beyond the supervision of the boss. Perhaps in today's creative and gig economy, with its growing precariousness, the integration of Arthur Daley's resourcefulness and Terry McCann's public spiritedness might offer an example to today's workers. Griffiths, for dramatic purpose, contrived the separation of quick-witted private enterprise from ponderous public service, and successive governments have perhaps insisted upon such a polarity for dogmatic and ideological reasons. In Linebaugh's account, the picaresque and proletarian are embodied in the same worker.

*Minder*, despite being the creation of Leon Griffiths, a class-conscious author, will never be entirely comfortable viewing for progressives, not least for its gender and racial politics. Arthur unquestionably regards himself as a respectable conservative figure, if only with a small 'c'. Yet *Minder*'s comic and ironic evocation of national champions—the entrepreneur and the combatant—came at a time when Britain was going through one of its periodic attempts to reboot its 'greatness' with aggressive free-market policies and military adventures in the South Atlantic. *Minder* is no endorsement of such pretensions. Rather its depiction of likeable low-life characters, trapped in an ossified class structure safeguarded for the undeserving rich, is more an indictment of the seemingly perpetual hankering after past glories that continues to skew public and political life in the UK.

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## *The Picaro and the Prole in Minder*

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